The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students
Special Issue • Volume 17, Fall 1996 • Boise State University •
Boise, ID 83725

Is the Mirror True or Warped? The Portrayal of Migrant Children in Literature

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"They want us to work. And they want us to disappear."
Juan Medina, 12 years old.

Hispanic migrant children are a large part of the diverse population in U.S. schools. Teachers who select books about migrant children for classroom use should be watchful that the lifestyles reflected in the books are portrayed

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accurately.

Authenticity in the presentation of minority children's culture and lifestyles in children's literature is essential (Bishop, 1992). How fictional work accomplishes this is a debatable issue particularly when the lifestyle is one of hardship and poverty. The purpose of this paper is to study how recent children's literature books about migrants present the daily life of migrant children. Are the authors presenting a true or warped picture of migrant children's experiences in these fictional works? This paper will compare the content of fictional works to what migrant children say about their lives through interviews and personal writing and will also make recommendations for teachers who plan to use these books in their classrooms.

Tomás Rivera's classic work, *Y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971) (And the Earth did not Devour Him), presents a poignant look at the life of migrant children. Although the novel was written expressly for adults, it provides readers with Rivera's image of that migrant existence. Adult readers understand the tragedy, the loneliness, the abuse, and the harshness of life these children often experience. How do fictional works for children portray this same lifestyle? Are these works accurate or misleading in their presentation of Hispanic migrant children's experiences and feelings?

Books and Sources Studied

For this study, I conducted a computer search by subject of children's literature books published in English between 1990 and 1996. Similarly, I conducted a search of Spanish literature books at the Center for the Study of Books in Spanish for Children at California State University, San Marcos. Additionally, I searched numerous children's literature catalogs from national publishing houses to find books dealing with migrant children and related topics. I found six books that dealt with migrant children as the subject or content of the stories. The six titles, four fiction and two nonfiction, all dealt with Hispanic migrant children. All were written by non-Hispanic authors.

The four fiction books are: *Radio Man* by Arthur Dorros, *El camino de Amelia* by Linda Jacobs Altman, *Lights on the River* by Jane Resh Thomas, and *Socorro, Daughter of the Desert* by Karen Papagapitos. These books, in English or varying bilingual formats, can also be classified as picture books for young to middle readers. *A Migrant Family*, a nonfiction book by Larry Dane Brimner is a photo essay of a migrant family in California. *Voices from the Fields*, by S. Beth Atkins is a collection of migrant children's creative writing and personal narrative.

Comparison: What Migrant Children Say and What Literature Portrays

In order to compare the children's literature portrayal with what actual migrant children consider important issues in their lives, I also used the results of a study conducted by Martinez, Scott, Cranston-Gingras, and Platt. The information the authors gleaned from interviews of 84 migrant children provides a first hand look at the children's personal views and experiences about their family life, their beliefs about schooling, and their goals and aspirations. I will compare what migrant children report as their reality to the topics presented as important issues in the children's literature. I used only the most salient issues as reported by the migrant children in the Martinez et al. research for comparison. The categories to be explored are: home, poverty, family, health problems, "working to help," and trouble in school.

Home and Poverty

The migrant children reported to Martinez et al. that poor housing, frequent moves, and living in poverty were the norm in their lives. Most of the respondents were realistic regarding the substandard housing in which they live.

Similarly, the nonfiction books contained forceful depictions of what some migrant housing is like. In *The Migrant Family*, Brimner's narrator, a twelve year old boy describes the dire living conditions many California migrants have to endure. Their home in an area referred to as "el monte" is a self-crafted tent where the children sleep on old mattresses on a platform over a dirt floor. The boy observes that they are better off than their neighbors, the "spider" people, who live in holes in the ground for shelter.

Moving frequently is the plight of all farm workers. It gives the children a heightened sense of wanting a home of their own and settling down. In Atkins' book, two teenage sisters describe their moves and how they are often separated from their mother and from each other. One explains, "We live in different houses and with different relatives a lot.... To remember better where I am, I bring special things with me" (p. 23). This concern is also tragically documented in Brimner's book when the children come home from school to find their tents and shacks bulldozed.

This personal and social issue of not having a home is dealt with quite differently in the fiction books. An inaccurate presentation of "homes" occurs particularly through the illustrations. In *Radio Man*, the houses clearly reflect a

migrant camp; however, the small houses are in perfect condition and in nice surroundings. In *El camino de Amelia*, the main character also lives in a poor migrant camp, but the illustrations show well kept housing including curtains. Amelia's strongest desire is to have a home: "Blanca y primorosa, con persianas azules en las ventana y un árbol hermoso... en el patio" (White and exquisite, with blue shutters on the windows and a beautiful tree in the yard)(n.p.).

Radio Man and *El camino de Amelia* feature families who move frequently. Amelia's family has moved so often they cannot even remember where Amelia was born. Yet these upheavals are portrayed as natural and easy for the parents although the children must leave their friends and familiar surroundings behind.

The only fictional book to present a truer picture of migrant existence in relation to home life and poverty is *Lights on the River*. As the family arrives at a new job site, they are offered an abandoned chicken coop with old stained mattresses on the floor. Even from afar, the family can smell the past inhabitants: "The chickens were gone, but Teresa could still see stains on the floor where their roosts had stood. She could faintly smell the sharp ammonia memory of the flock." Thomas also deals accurately with feelings of loneliness and rootlessness. Teresa's mother sums up her belief when she tells her daughter, "Here in the United States we carry our house on our backs" (n.p.).

Family Size

The children in the Martinez et al. study also reported that large families are another contributing factor to poverty. The interviewees lived in families that averaged 5.4 children with a range of 1 to 15 children per home. The nonfiction books present this issue accurately through the narratives of the children. In Atkins' book, young José Luis Ríos asserts this fact in his essay "La fresa" (The strawberry): "I have nine brothers and sisters. We live with our parents and aunt and uncle and cousins in Las Lomas" (p. 11). Another young author recounts, "Now I sleep with my brother, Juan, and my father in one bed. My mother and my sisters, Bertha, Fatima, Cristina, and Carla, sleep in the other one" (p. 29).

But, in a departure from what the children and the research indicate, the fiction books portray small migrant families with the largest one having three children. In two of the books, even the extended families were small consisting of a grandfather in one and an aunt in another. They show readers a migrant life that does not correspond to the reality of most migrant children's lives.

Value of Family and "Working to Help"

The value of the family within the Hispanic culture has been well documented. Within the migrant culture, the family unit is often crucial because the family members are all responsible for the economic, social, and emotional survival of the family. Migrant labor is the only type of work where children under the age of sixteen can work legally (Atkins, 1993). Accordingly, in *Voices From the Fields*, the child authors seem to center their writings around their love of family or love for their parents. In 16 out of 19 selections, the children write about their family. Atkins tells how above all else the migrants, "help each other for the good of the entire family even at the cost of the individual" (p. 6). Several of the poems and narratives in Atkins' collection reveal how the children help in the fields.

Working in the fields from an early age is also reported in the Martinez study. Many migrant children report going to work as early as age six and not being paid until they reached legal age. All their hard work and effort were done to help the parents secure a higher wage. Another true aspect of the children's life is that they often work after school and on weekends, with girls baby-sitting their younger siblings in trucks or along the fields where the rest of the family is working. All the fiction books present the value of family and doing everything possible to help the family survive either through working in the fields or in other ways.

Health Problems

Probably more than any other group of school aged children, migrant children are exposed to health hazards on a regular basis. Migrant work is classified as one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States for many reasons (Parlee & Boorin, 1986). Three main contributing factors are working close to pesticides, dealing with farm machinery, and living in substandard, unhealthful housing.

Many of the children interviewed by Martinez et al. (1994) noted that their problems at school are often the result of missing too many days due to illness. One young boy in *Voices From the Fields* talks about his many health problems: "I used to have trouble with my teeth... I had to go to a lot of doctors for my ears. My ears hurt, but if I put my hands over them, it made them stop hurting" (p. 33). Where children live in ramshackle shacks, eat poorly, and share toilet facilities with numerous other families, sickness is commonplace.

Only one of the four fiction books focuses on health problems as a reality of

migrant life. In *Socorro, Daughter of the Desert*, Socorro's father, along with many other farm workers, has fallen ill with a malaria-like disease. This story chronicles how close to illness and financial disaster many migrant families live.

Trouble in School

Due to their almost constant movement in search of jobs, regular school attendance is a significant issue for migrant children. It is not surprising that succeeding in school surfaces as one of the main concerns of migrants. All the nonfiction works reiterate how the children appreciate the value of an education while at the same time they realize how elusive a goal this might be for them. Martinez et al. (1994) report that most of the migrant children struggle to stay in school while problems such as absenteeism, language difficulties, and low self-esteem present insurmountable obstacles (p. 335).

Nevertheless, the children state that their teachers and classes offer a sense of stability while they attend school. Through interviews and personal narratives, the children debunk the myth that migrants do not value education. Even in Brimner's (1992) "el monte" family, the children try to do homework. Atkins' writers tell of the importance of staying in school, and the older contributors praise special programs that offer to help them succeed (p. 90).

The fiction, on the other hand, presents the issue of school for migrant children only in passing and in a positive light. In *El camino de Amelia* and *Radio Man* the characters go to school for a period of time and seem to enjoy it.

Conclusions

This study has compared migrant children's lives and how that life is portrayed in four recent fictional children's books. When comparing the fictional themes and ideas to what actual migrant children report, I found that some fictional authors do not always offer realistic and accurate portrayals.

To summarize, the single issue presented realistically in all four fictional books is working to help the family. To one degree or another, all the young characters help their families either by directly working in the fields or by caring for their siblings. Other worries that migrant children experience regarding their homes, families, and poverty emerge separately in several of the books. While most of the children mentioned a need of a home as a recurring problem, it only appears in two of the books. A realistic presentation of substandard housing plays a significant role in only one book's setting.

Figure 1. Issues Presented in Fictional Books.

ISSUES	El camino de Amelia	Radio Man	Lights on the River	Socorro, Daughter of the Desert
Home	+		+	
Poverty			+	+
Family			+	+
Health problems				+
Working to help	+	+	+	+
Trouble in school	+			

The overwhelming poverty that most migrant children experience daily is portrayed in only two books. Thomas in *Lights on the River* and Papagapitos in *Socorro, Daughter of the Desert* are able to dramatize the poverty while at the same time recognize the pride the characters maintain for survival.

The majority of migrant children interviewed by Martinez et al. (1994) mentioned how they credited the strength of family for helping them survive and feel whole. Yet, only two books mentioned showed this power and strength of family within the story lines. Migrant health issues and preoccupation with schooling are only mentioned in passing in several of the fictional books.

If these fictional books are used in classrooms to help children understand what the life of migrant children might be, readers would find a warped image at best. While these stories might entertain, for the most part, they do not inform in a genuine manner. Children's literature is "a way for young people to find out about the world and their place in it" (Zuckerman, 1986, p. 629). To be fair to the authors represented, no single story can relate the totality of any situation. However individuals selecting these books should be aware of how limited a view of migrant life these authors present.

Recommendations for Selecting and Using Culturally Distinct Literature

Using children's literature in classrooms to present a multicultural or nonmainstream perspective is essential. This type of literature can add immensely to children's understanding of other people. As has been shown, some fictional books about migrants do not present a true or accurate portrayal of their lives.

Therefore, what should teachers consider when selecting or using these or similar books of culturally distinct lifestyles? Norton (1993), Yokota (1993), and others have recommended several criteria for selecting quality multicultural literature. The following ideas can be added to this advice particularly when few books on a particular group are available or when the teacher is not familiar with said group.

Ascertain the Ethnicity of the Authors

In creating fictional pieces, nongroup authors are interpreting a lifestyle and a culture apart from their own, and writing realistically from this position is difficult. A good beginning strategy for selecting books on a particular culture is to ascertain the ethnicity of the authors. While the same ethnic or cultural membership does not necessarily guarantee a book's authenticity (Yokota, 1993; Harris, 1992), direct experience can offer a truer reflection of that life. Therefore, this information can be used to help maintain a balance of perspective.

Review for Realistic Story Line

Does the story develop in a realistic manner, and does the end satisfy the reader? For example, in *El camino de Amelia*, the main character buries a special "house wish" box under a beautiful tree. She believes that this action will grant her wish for a house on that spot. Will children believe that a wish of that magnitude will come true so easily? While it is understood that authors are free to choose their topics, a realistic presentation of the characters' lifestyle is preferred. Children will gain much knowledge from a story that is believable and rings true.

Include Nonfiction Books in Literature Units

In planning a literature-based unit about a particular group of people or culture, teachers should include nonfiction books. Nonfiction will supply facts and interesting material that fiction many times cannot include.

Incorporate Books that Contain Social Justice Issues

When reading books related to minorities or other distinct groups, social issues need to be included. Minority people are demanding that their stories be told in a truthful manner so their victimization can be revealed (Macmillan/ McGraw-Hill, p. 19). If children are to learn from literature, then sensitive issues must be discussed and clarified with the reading audience. Mainstream children need to become personally involved, at least through discussion and commentary, to discover how these concerns are their issues as well.

Check With Resource Persons Familiar With the Culture

Mainstream teachers unfamiliar with a particular culture or lifestyle can ask resource persons familiar with the group to review the accuracy of the content. These resource persons may be parents, community members, or district

employees.

Select a Large Representation of Books

In making selections, teachers should strive to bring into the classroom as many books as possible on a particular culture or lifestyle. No one book can possibly present a topic in its totality or without some bias. Therefore many books can offer the students varied perspectives and comparisons, and discussions will be enriched by the variety.

Demand Authenticity From Publishing Houses

Teachers should demand from publishers that genuineness be required of books dealing with minority topics. Authenticity tempered with empathy about these children's lives will generate stories that are significant, informative, and enjoyable. Teachers need to be aware of the importance of their responses in determining what is published.

In classrooms where migrant children are present, these additional suggestions should be considered.

Integrate Literature About Migrants Into the Content Areas.

Integrating literature about the group into the content areas allows the migrant children to draw on their knowledge base of migrant experiences and to turn these experiences into benefits for the whole class. Many migrant children know a great deal about nature, geography, and food. Their first hand experiences in the fields also give them conceptual knowledge of science and mathematics as well. Additionally, these children may have a strong sense of interpersonal relationships that can help them succeed in different classroom settings such as cooperative groups, centers, and author chairs. Certainly, extending the literature into the corresponding curriculum will provide a classroom advantage for these children and the entire class.

Maintain High Levels of Sensitivity

If migrant children are present in the classroom, the teacher must maintain a high degree of sensitivity to the topics covered in the stories. Teachers should plan critical literacy activities where the children deal with the story elements at a personal level. These types of reading and thinking activities are important for the nonmigrant children as well as a way to avoid stereotyping. Teachers who attempt to develop critical thinking activities should be familiar with the culture, lifestyle, or both in order to teach and not offend in any way.

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